Women in Custody

Alberta

88-05114/

Women in Custody

A Profile of Women in Custody

- Almost 200 women are awaiting trial or serving sentences in correctional centres in Alberta on any given day.
- Women make up approximately 7% of the inmate population incarcerated in provincial correctional facilities.
- Close to 45% of the women admitted to custody are Native.
- Most women in custody have committed crimes categorized as property offences (31%); only 5% of the total female inmate population have committed offences involving threats, weapons or violence against persons.
- Impaired driving offences account for 11% of the female inmate population.
- Women in custody in Alberta tend to be in their late twenties or early thirties.
- Most report to have received a grade 9-11 education.
- Women in custody are often poor, under-educated, unskilled and lacking in self-esteem. They are generally ill-equipped to support themselves or their families. Some have grown up in environments characterized by poverty, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and a lack of parental support or appropriate discipline. Many abuse drugs or alcohol, or both, and often commit crimes to support these dependencies. Some have never held a legitimate job.

Special Needs

Women in custody represent a special challenge to correctional authorities.

While authorities recognize that women should receive equal access to all services and programs, the proportionately low numbers of female inmates make the meaningful delivery of programs an ideal which is not always practical, nor cost efficient.

In addition, the personal circumstances of women who are placed in custody are often such that they require a period of self-examination and adjustment before they are able to participate fully in the program opportunities offered to them.

It is particularly important for many women in custody to maintain close ties with spouses and children.

Program Objectives

Alberta Correctional Services is committed to ensuring the protection of society, while also providing appropriate recognition of the legal rights, human dignity and special needs of women in custody.

Program priorities involve a thorough assessment of each woman's personal and criminal history, the examination of needs and priorities, and the development of concrete and achievable plans to facilitate release into circumstances which will provide the chance to gain control over the future.

Meeting Special Needs

Program Design

Women may be admitted to eight of the twelve adult provincial correctional centres in Alberta. These are located in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer, Lethbridge and Medicine Hat.

These facilities provide co-correctional programs which ensure that women have access to the same services as male offenders. Additionally, special programs of particular interest and relevance to women are provided. Often these programs hvae been planned in consultation with interested community groups and the women themselves. Available programs may include parenting, nutrition, support groups for victims of abuse and other relevant issues. They are intended to supplement the co-correctional programs component, in recognition that the experience of many women in custody is such that attention to personal development and growth is a necessary prerequisite to equal and full participation in the regular co-correctional environment.

Federal Offenders in Provincial Custody

As a result of a special agreement between Alberta and the Government of Canada, many female inmates are accepted by the province to serve their federal sentences in a provincial correctional centre. This allows women from Alberta who have been sentenced to extensive periods of incarceration to remain in relative proximity to their family and friends, rather than being moved to the federal Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario.

Available Facilities

The correctional facilities in Alberta available to women range from maximum security remand centres to community correctional centres where the program emphasis is on day release programs.

Edmonton Remand Centre, Calgary Remand Centre, Red Deer Remand Centre, Medicine Hat Remand Centre

- These centres provide short-term accommodation to adults awaiting court appearance or trial. They represent a combined total of 99 beds for women with remand status. Once sentenced, female inmates are transferred to provincial correctional centres designed for sentenced inmates.

Bow River Correctional Centre

- Located in Calgary, this centre accommodates female offenders with minimum security and day release status. It will also accept short-term medium security offenders. This facility has 16 beds for women.

Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre

- This is the primary facility for women with medium security status sentenced to a substantive period of incarceration. Most women with a federal sentence serve their period of incarceration at this facility and, accordingly, the centre's program emphasis is increasingly on the long-term offender. The centre has 96 beds for women.

Lethbridge Correctional Centre

- This facility admits both remanded and sentenced women and will accommodate up to 28 female inmates. The centre's multipurpose nature is reflected in a wide range of program opportunities, which include day release from the nearby Lakeside Correctional Centre.

Belmont Correctional Centre

- This facility, located in Edmonton, offers offenders the opportunity to participate in day release programs. Twenty-five beds are provided for women.

Programs

The primary purpose of programs offered to women in custody is to ensure productive use of time, while developing self-reliance and skills towards achieving an independent, law-abiding lifestyle.

Work Programs

All women in custody are expected to attend to daily work assignments, some of which are linked to training programs. Women may work in maintenance, on harvest or garden crews, in the laundry, kitchen or vegetable production areas, in trade shops, in libraries, as tutors, hobby assistants or in many other capacities. Incentive pay is provided for satisfactory performance.

Health Care and Mental Health Services

The restoration of both physical and mental health is a priority for many women in custody. Professional health care staff are equipped to deal with most medical requirements and, where necessary, women are escorted to community clinics for appointments with specialists. Increasing emphasis is being placed on the presentation of health clinics as program opportunities. Such topics as personal hygiene, infectious disease control, pre- and post-natal care, and the preservation of health are addressed. A full range of psychiatric and psychological services are available on-site at the Edmonton and Calgary Remand Centres, and the Fort Saskatchewan and Lethbridge Correctional Centres.

Educational Programs

All educational and vocational programs are offered by accredited post-secondary institutions under contract to Alberta Correctional Services. Program completion qualifies participants for approved credit at the attended institution or other equivalent community schools or colleges. University level status is attainable. Qualified students may also enter the University of Athabasca long-distance learning program.

Educational programs cover three key areas: academic education, vocational training and life management skills. Academic programs offer participants the opportunity to upgrade in all core subjects at all academic levels. General Equivalency Diplomas (G.E.D.) and apprenticeship examinations are administered at the centres.

The nature of vocational programs varies depending on the size of the correctional facility, however, the range of programs which may be available includes business courses, computing/word processing, hairdressing, horticulture, industrial construction, small appliance repair, woodwork and many other topics of interest.

A Life Management program involves such topics as communication skills, self-discovery, family life, problem solving, assertiveness and career planning. Additionally, many centres offer a variety of adult interest courses such as Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation, arts and crafts, and interpersonal skills. A Living with Kids program, offered at some centres, provides indepth study of child development and parenting skills and offers practical experience in child care.

Recreation

A wide range of sports, library, hobby, handicrafts and other recreational activities are available. Sportsfield events are popular in the summer. All facilities offer the use of a gymnasium and assorted recreational equipment. Many recreation events operate with the support of volunteers and community groups.

Alcohol and Drug Programs

Most centres provide both indepth and short-term programs including information services and programs for impaired drivers, as well as Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. As part of their release plans, women may be referred to residential facilities in the community which provide intensive addictions treatment programs.

Religious Services

Chaplaincy services are provided at all facilities and arrangements can be made for visitation by representatives of most denominations. Chaplains also offer individual counselling and will work with family members to help solve a variety of issues and problems. An atmosphere of respect for religious differences is promoted.

Native Programs

Alberta Correctional Services maintains a significant commitment to Native involvement in service delivery to Native offenders. This service network extends from assistance with court proceedings, to programming in correctional centres, to the involvement of Native Counselling Services of Alberta in many aspects of community supervision and support. Most facilities provide on-site services by Native liaison workers. Additionally, the co-correctional meetings of the Native Brotherhood Association are well attended and a variety of cultural events are sponsored at the larger centres.

Visiting

All correctional centres offer regular visiting hours. Most visits occur in open areas where women may communicate freely with family, friends and relatives. Visits by children are encouraged and some centres have special play areas and activities available. In recognition of the impact of long-term incarceration on family relationships, Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre provides a live-in visiting apartment which women may apply to book for extended overnight visits with family members or other approved visitors.

Volunteer and Agency Services

Alberta Correctional Services has historically been committed to an active and resourceful volunteer program and the integration of a variety of services provided by non-profit agencies.

The Elizabeth Fry Society maintains active programs in Edmonton and Calgary which focus on visitation, recreation programming and assistance in pre-release planning. The John Howard Society will also respond to requests for assistance from women in custody. Additionally, women may acquire the services of individual volunteers assigned to provide support and supplementary casework assistance where necessary.

Release Programs

As most women serve relatively short sentences, planning for appropriate release becomes a concern almost immediately upon admission. Women have access to both the provincial Temporary Absence Program and Parole, which is administered by the National Parole Board. By progressing from day passes to weekend passes to more extended leaves, and by working closely with staff or support agencies on realistic, achievable release plans, the great majority of women are able to earn early release.

Conclusion

Women faced with the reality of having to serve a period of incarceration are at a significant crossroad in their lives.

Help and support are available if they wish to turn this event into an opportunity towards future self-sufficiency as law abiding citizens.